

Civic Engagement

## Can We Sustain It?

How to transform the fervor of political resistance into a new era of civic engagement.

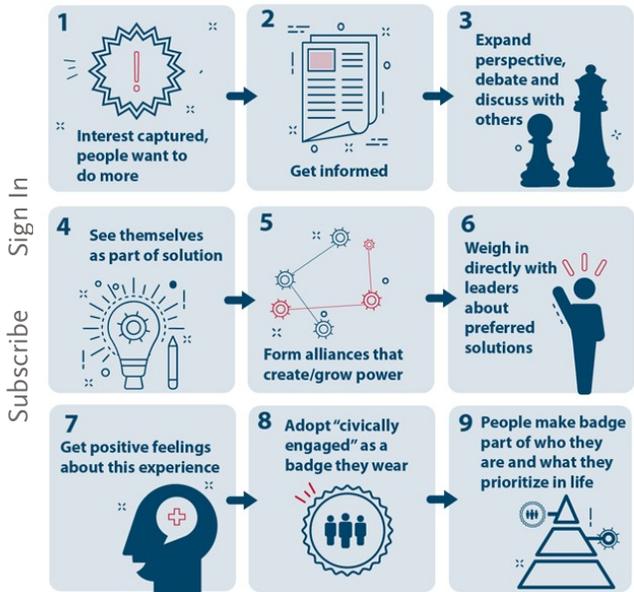
By [Kristen Grimm & Emily Gardner](#) | Jun. 26, 2017

**T**his question—can we sustain it?—is one we often see in the [news](#) ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/speaking-of-science/wp/2017/05/03/a-scientist-who-studies-protest-says-the-resistance-isnt-slowing-down/?utm\\_term=.a48cd107eb3c](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/speaking-of-science/wp/2017/05/03/a-scientist-who-studies-protest-says-the-resistance-isnt-slowing-down/?utm_term=.a48cd107eb3c)) and hear at cocktail receptions these days, as people follow the political resistance that has emerged since the US election of Donald Trump. From the worldwide [Women’s March](#) (<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2017/01/21/womens-march-aims-start-movement-trump-inauguration/96864158/>) to [packed town hall events](#) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/09/us/politics/town-hall-meetings-.html>) to [jammed Congressional phone lines](#) (<http://www.cnn.com/2017/02/03/politics/congress-phone-calls/>), many are wondering: Is the fervor driving the resistance a passing phenomenon? Or is this a new era of civic engagement that will stand the test of time? And how can civic institutions turn this passionate political moment from a fleeting fad into a way of life—one that advances important progressive issues like equality, inclusive economies, and a sustainable world?

We were inspired to consider this more deeply after listening to an interview with [Tristan Harris](#) (<http://www.tristanharris.com/>). Harris was a design ethicist at Google, acting as the tech giant’s conscience as it thought about how its products shape users’ thoughts. In his post-Google career, he has started a project called [Time Well Spent](#) (<http://www.timewellspent.io/>), which aims to create awareness around how technology hijacks the mind and diverts our attention from what we really want to be doing, and instead takes us down a rabbit hole to, say, figure out what a former child star looks like now.

What does any of this have to do with turning civic engagement into a way of life? Everything. We can use the same tricks companies use to win the battle for our attention to transform civic engagement from a hobby to a habit. **Snapchat** (<https://www.snapchat.com/>), for example, uses the theory of reciprocity to make us overvalue things like Snapstreaks, where users work hard to engage with someone day after day to avoid breaking their streak—a modern-day version of losing a staring contest. We can do the same thing to make democracy addictive.

**Smart communications can help you channel interest or outrage into civic action that becomes a way of life**



A step-by-step guide to turning fleeting interest into lasting engagement. (Image by Sydney McKenney, Spitfire)

Ready to take a walk through civic engagement: from hobby to habit?

People wear badges—sometimes literally, but usually not. These represent self-selected and deeply meaningful ideas about who we are, what we stand for, and why we live the way we do. We adopt these badges—road warrior, foodie, thrill-seeker, car enthusiast—over our lifetimes. They matter to us. We try to live up to them.

If we want to make passionate civic engagement a way of life, we have to make it a badge people want to earn and wear forever. Here’s how.



First, **we have to get people’s attention.** The 2016 election was just about the most effective attention-grabber you could ask for. But how can we get attention

without relying on someone else’s tweets?

- **Make it timely and personal.** The further away something seems, the easier it is to ignore. This is called **temporal discounting** (<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/03/vending-machines-vs-free-will/521514/>). It’s why some Americans don’t get involved in the refugee crisis. It seems so far away and doesn’t appear to affect daily life, so they don’t engage. If you want to draw attention to something, bring it closer: Show an immediate impact on the person

or those they love, or point out how people are talking about it. Make it relevant to life and not an abstract concept. That is why **tying pollution to personal health** (<https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2016/jul/05/how-air-pollution-affects-your-health-infographic>) is more effective than talking about parts per million.

- **Make it high-stakes.** Use **loss aversion** ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loss\\_aversion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loss_aversion)) if you want someone to sit up and take notice. People value what they are going to lose more than what they are going to gain. Planned Parenthood used this as the underlying concept of a **video produced by Buffy the Vampire Slayer creator Joss Whedon** ([https://secure.ppaction.org/site/SPageServer/?pagename=pp\\_ppol\\_WhedonVideo\\_0517\\_Landing\\_c3.html&cs\\_subsrc=3NALz1711W1N1V&cs\\_src=WhedonVideo\\_](https://secure.ppaction.org/site/SPageServer/?pagename=pp_ppol_WhedonVideo_0517_Landing_c3.html&cs_subsrc=3NALz1711W1N1V&cs_src=WhedonVideo_)), which shows what we have to lose—including affordable health screenings and sex education—if Planned Parenthood is defunded.

Next, **people need to get informed.** We are seeing this happen naturally with more people turning to valid news sources and at least being aware of, if not entirely avoiding, “fake news.” We can encourage this behavior in a couple of ways.



- **Practice inoculation** ([https://theconversation.com/inoculation-theory-using-misinformation-to-fight-misinformation-77545?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Latest%20from%20The%20Conversation%20for%20May%2015%202017%20-](https://theconversation.com/inoculation-theory-using-misinformation-to-fight-misinformation-77545?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Latest%20from%20The%20Conversation%20for%20May%2015%202017%20-)). This means heightening awareness of misinformation. In the interview mentioned earlier, Harris mentioned the idea of referring to fake news as “fake sensationalism.” That term taps into the power of ridicule to deflate the concept and put people on guard about falling for it, since no one wants to be seen as gullible.
- **Spend time finding common ground.** Don’t move too fast from identifying a problem to pushing a solution that triggers “**solution aversion**” ([https://dukespace.lib.duke.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/10161/9256/Campbell et al.\\_Solution Aversion.pdf](https://dukespace.lib.duke.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/10161/9256/Campbell_et_al._Solution_Aversion.pdf)).” If you present a solution people don’t like (such as suggesting a new regulation to a small-government conservative), they are motivated to question the problem as a way to avoid the solution. To prevent this, spend more time talking about the consequences of the problem to raise its salience.



Once people are informed, they’re ready to **expand their perspective**—to engage, discuss, and debate with others. Missing this critical step could lead to short-term activism and long-term burnout. Organizers know that going door-to-door and having real discussions can deepen relationships and trust. Taking time to hear from





Ultimately, Barbra Streisand was right: People need people. While people want to know that they, individually, can make a difference, as social creatures we like to make a difference in groups. **Encourage people to form alliances that create and grow power.**

- **Make conflict resolution** an intentional and frequent practice to keep unfixable rifts from occurring. Forming alliances with **people we don't always see eye-to-eye with is a powerful experience, but it can also lead to tension and discomfort.**
- **Lean into the idea of coasting.** No one can be “on” 24/7. One way to keep civic engagement sustainable is to set the expectation that people get rest periods while still being part of the solution. They can rely on allies to carry the torch when they need to take a break—and then return the favor.

Now, get people to **weigh in directly with leaders about preferred solutions, and get responses.**



This leads directly into the next critical step of making civic engagement a way of life: **giving people immense satisfaction from getting involved.** This happens when you cultivate feelings of pride and success.

- **People crave social currency.** [This Washington Post article](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2017/05/16/epa-asked-the-public-which-regulations-to-gut-and-got-an-earful-about-leaving-them-alone/?utm_term=.4a705d0f48a2) ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2017/05/16/epa-asked-the-public-which-regulations-to-gut-and-got-an-earful-about-leaving-them-alone/?utm\\_term=.4a705d0f48a2](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2017/05/16/epa-asked-the-public-which-regulations-to-gut-and-got-an-earful-about-leaving-them-alone/?utm_term=.4a705d0f48a2).) offers a good example. It describes how people were encouraged to submit their opinions to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) about environmental regulations. The EPA expected to get many comments about the need to roll back “onerous” standards but was surprised that the sentiment was the exact opposite. (“Please don’t” basically sums it up.) Commenters felt pride for doing their part, which was reinforced when media coverage proved they were among thousands of others who weighed in on how important these regulations are to protect our health and safety.
- **Use catalysts and “nourishers” to harness the power of progress.** This [Harvard Business Review article](https://hbr.org/2011/05/the-power-of-small-wins) (<https://hbr.org/2011/05/the-power-of-small-wins>) explains that the “progress principle” distinguishes people’s good days from their bad days. Keep in mind, progress doesn’t mean mission accomplished. It can be small or big steps, but the point is that people perceive forward movement. To show progress, you can use “catalysts.” For example, the wave of comments to the EPA was a catalytic moment for the fight against pollution. Meanwhile, “nourishers” are pats on the back and “We did it!” celebrations. Both

of these give people good feelings, which means good days—the kind of days people want to repeat. With all this positivity, people are more likely to do what it takes to have more good days—in this case, getting involved and speaking out.

Once you've led people through the steps above, they'll be ready to **adopt “civically engaged” as a badge** they wear and do it publicly. The “I voted” sticker (and the ubiquitous Instagram posts of said sticker) proves this can work. It's a public display that says, “I did my duty.”



The next step? To figure out the other places people can proclaim that they are civically engaged and proud. What is the equivalent of the “I love my pug” bumper sticker for people who go to town hall meetings? Will high school seniors start handing out “Most Likely to Fight for Change” awards along with “Best Dressed” and “Cutest Couple”? Do we need a massive music festival—a Woodstock for the

21st century—where people can tag themselves on social media and show they are part of the civically engaged tribe? People need outlets to declare their badge and live up to it.

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Ultimately, this becomes part of who they are and what they prioritize in life. Only then will the resistance have made the essential shift our democracy demands by moving civic engagement from hobby to habit.

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**Kristen Grimm** (@headspitfire) is founder and president of Spitfire, a public interest strategy firm that helps nonprofits and foundations raise their voices to create positive social change.



**Emily Gardner** is a Director at Spitfire.

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